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Investigating the Recognition and Interpretation of English Idioms by Arab South Yemeni

Learners

Abstract: This study is an investigation of the comprehension of English idiomatic expressions by postgraduate students (M.A. Students at the Center for English and Translation Studies, Aden University, South Yemen). It aims at examining the extent to which master students recognize English idioms and the role of context in interpreting idioms. In this respect, a test of two parts: part one is an idiom recognition test in which 12 English idioms are out of context is presented to students to recognize the meaning from a multi-choice. Part two is an idiom interpretation test in which the same 12 idioms are in context is also given to students to interpret the idiom meaning. The results of the test of the study show that transparent idioms or idioms that have equivalents in Arabic are easier than opaque idioms or idioms that do not

have equivalents in Arabic. The results also show that context plays a crucial role in interpreting the appropriate meaning of idioms.

Keywords: idiomatic expressions, recognition, interpretation

1. Introduction

This research aims basically at examining the comprehension of idiomatic expressions by the M.A. Students at the Center for English and Translation Studies, Aden University. That is to say, it attempts to investigate how the recognition of which applies to all idioms; if so how does it affect different idioms? The decision to work on this topic is justified by the fact that students of foreign /second language usually deal with different kinds of figurative language, like idiomatic expressions which are actually problematic. Idioms are a part of metaphorical language: they have figurative meanings as well as literal ones, they belong to the culture of language and then to its systematic features. They are fixed and frozen patterns of language and often carry meanings which cannot be interpreted from their individual words. They cannot be interpreted literally since they have idiomatic meanings and must be taken as one single unit. The meaning of an idiom is different from other literal expressions in that it could not be guessed by understanding all the words in the idiom. For example, making sense of the expression *rain cats and dogs* might be difficult if it has not been taught before.

2. Statement of the Problem

Language is considered to be a system of communication that is used by a particular community of people. It has literal and figurative meanings. While the literal meaning is the direct reference of words or sentences to objects, the figurative sense is used for giving an imaginative description or a special effect .Therefore, the meaning of individual words in an

idiomatic expression has nothing to do with the comprehension of the whole meaning. Such a meaning characterizes certain aspects such as idioms, which are frequently used in everyday language.

Difficulties of English idiomatic expressions appear from their figurative meanings that are different from the meaning of their individual words. As a result, and as my experience as a teacher of English show, foreign/ second language learners misunderstand and misinterpret the meaning of English idioms. For example, the expression *under the weather* which means not very well is misinterpreted by some students in the departments of English, Aden University as under rainy, hot or chilly weather. In fact it means that the purpose of this study is to investigate how students recognize and interpret such important aspects of English.

3. The Aim and Objectives of the Research

The main aim of this research is to investigate the students' recognition and interpretation of English idiomatic expressions. Specifically this research has the following

Objectives:

- 1- To find out the students' degree of recognition of English idioms.
- 2- To explore the effect of context in interpreting idioms.
- 3-

4. Research Questions

The investigation of the recognition and interpretation of English idiomatic expressions will attempt to answer the following questions:

Q1: To what extent do students recognize English idioms?

Q2: To what extent does contextualization (the context in use) help in interpreting idioms?

5. The Significance of the Study

Foreign/second learners of English very often come across figurative expressions. One of these figurative expressions is an idiom. There is recently increased importance in recognizing and understanding such idiomatic expressions of both spoken and written English.

This study takes its significance from these important types of idiomatic expressions and pays attention to make both teachers and learners take care of this issue. This study has been chosen to provide an in-depth investigation of English idioms problems. It tries to explore how well students recognize and interpret English idioms.

6. Literature Review

6.1. The Nature of Idioms

In spite of the increased number of studies on idioms, there has not been a disputable definition of the term '*idiom*'. What is agreed on is that idioms are very difficult to characterize and it is impossible to define them in an indisputable way (Kainulainen 2006).

To show how the matter is complicated, it is necessary to distinguish idioms from idiomaticity. Idiomaticity represents "the quality of being marked by idioms" (Grant 2003: 21). Fernando (1996: 30) also agrees that idioms and idiomaticity have close relations but they are not identical. All idioms naturally indicate idiomaticity but all word combinations that show idiomaticity are not idioms. Fernando (ibid: 30) mentions examples of word combinations, such as *catch a bus/ a tram and black/ strong coffee*, which indicate idiomaticity but are not idioms since they are unrestricted in their variants. The constituents of idioms have no changes or they have little changes. Thus, the idiom *spill the beans* can be passivised while preserving its idiomatic meaning, whereas, the idiom *kick the bucket* loses its idiomatic meaning when passivised. Mantyla (2004 in Kainulainen 2006: 8) thinks that the main issue with idioms is the nature of literalness and figurativeness and their relationship to each other. For example, the

idiomatic meaning of *shoot the breeze* 'to chat idly' has nothing to do with the meaning of *shoot* and *the breeze*, and the individual meaning of the words is not related in any way to the idiomatic meaning . For other idioms, a certain connection between the individual words and the whole meaning can be seen. For example, the idiom *save your breath* means avoid useless effort, one can connect the meaning of save to avoid. The definition of the term '*idiom*' depends on which feature is emphasized; structure, frozenness, fixedness, figurativeness.. etc.

6.2. The Definition of an Idiom

Idioms are one of the most important aspects in English. They are frequently used in every spoken and written forms of English. There are several definitions of the term idiom. These are general definitions from dictionaries and from linguistic works by specialized linguists. I will start with definitions of dictionaries. A definition is from the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009:870) which says that an idiom is "a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word". Oxford Learner's Pocket Dictionary (2003:212) says that an idiom is "a group of words with a meaning that is different from the meaning of all the individual words".

The following definitions of the term idiom are taken from the works that specialize in linguistics. According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2002: 6) "idioms are expressions which have a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words". This definition explains a basic characteristic of the idiom; its meaning cannot be induced from its parts. Likewise, Baker (1992:63) defines idioms as "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components". It is obvious from this definition that idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be inferred from the meaning of their parts. Hence, idioms as a single unit have a different meaning from that of their constituent words. In addition, Carter (1987: 65) defines idioms as especial

combinations with restricted forms and meaning that cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of the words which make them up". Accordingly, an idiom is learned and used as a whole with its idiomatic meaning that cannot be changed.

In this section there is also a pragmatic definition by Kay (1997 in Dvorakova 2010: 7); he says that "an idiomatic expression is something a language user could fail to know while knowing everything in the language". Kay wants to say whatever a speaker has a knowledge in grammar and vocabulary, he might fail in interpreting an idiomatic expression in a proper way.

Generally, all the above definitions that are taken from dictionaries or from linguistic works show that idioms are non-literal expressions due to their figurative meanings. These figurative meanings are not problematic to native speakers who can easily understand idioms but non-native speakers find so many problems in recognizing, using and interpreting them. The phrase *John kicked the bucket* as an example is not clear and can be differently interpreted in two ways. The first is literal as John hit the bucket with his leg. This way of interpretation is understood by non-native speakers who have not come across this idiom before. The second is a non- literal interpretation as an idiom meaning *John died*, and this will actually be by the native speakers who study the English idioms.

6.3. Categorization of Idioms

The degree of idiomaticity that an idiom has is the main feature to distinguish between the different kinds of idioms. Fernanod and Flavel (1981 : 28) use four- points scale from the idioms that are not difficult to be interpreted (transparent) to others that are totally opaque i.e. semantically opaque (the meaning of an idiom cannot be guessed from the meaning of its parts). These four types are: transparent, semi- transparent, semi- opaque and opaque idioms.

6.3.1. Transparent Idioms

This type of idioms includes expressions whose meaning can be derived from the words containing the idiomatic expression. Hence, transparent idioms are not difficult to understand and interpret, component words have a direct meaning but the combination acquires figurative sense. For example, to *see the light* means to understand.

6.3.2. Semi Transparent Idioms

Idioms in this type carry often metaphorical meaning. The constituents of an idiom contribute in interpreting the idiomatic meaning. *Breaking the ice* (relieving the tension) is an example in which the word *break* corresponds to the idiomatic sense of abruptly changing uncomfortable social situation, and the word *ice* corresponds to the idiomatic sense of social or interpersonal tension (Glucksberg 2001: 74). In addition to the metaphorical sense, this type can also have a literal counterpart. Consider an expression as *spill the beans* that might be interpreted as slop or spread the beans somewhere.

6.3.3. Semi Opaque Idioms

Idioms of this type are not easy to be recognized or interpreted but it may be possible to understand their meaning from their formation. Thus, the expression is divided into two parts; a part with a literal meaning and another part with an idiomatic meaning. The part of the literal meaning may help to some extent in explaining the other. For example, the idiomatic expression gives *someone a piece of one's mind*; the expression *piece of mind* may infer that an opinion has been communicated. *Black* in the expression *black market* helps to infer that it stands for the system by which people illegally buy and sell. These kinds of idioms look more intelligible than the next ones.

6.3.4. Opaque Idioms

This type of idioms is the most difficult one, because the meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of its separate parts. According to Glucksberg (2001) the individual words in opaque idioms restrict the interpretation as well as the use of a single unit ; for example, the expression *Kick the bucket* in *he kicked the bucket all day* is unacceptable because *Kicking* is a discrete part. Therefore, there is no relation between the literal and idiomatic meaning at all. This is actually because the presence of cultural items. These cultural-specific items affect the comprehensibility of idiomatic expressions. For example, to *burn one's boot* means to make retreat impossible.

According to Glucksberg (2001:74) idioms can be classified into four different groups divided in terms of transparency (semantically transparent and semantically opaque), syntactic analyzability and semantic compositionality. A compositional idiom has different properties. The components of a fully compositional idiom have a semantic relation to the idiomatic meaning. For example, the idiom *drop a bomb* in which the word *drop* refers to the idiomatic meaning of unexpectedly announce and the word *bomb* refers to the idiomatic meaning of something shocking. A partly compositional idiom can be regarded compositional for its ability to be altered regarding tense. For example, the component parts of the opaque idiom *kick the bucket* have no relation to the idiomatic meaning to *die* but can possibly be altered regarding tense: he *kicked the bucket*, he is *likely* to kick the bucket. The components of non-compositional have no relation to the meaning of the idiom. *By and large* does not have a literal meaning and it is not possible to alter or paraphrase. The transparency of an idiom can be explained as follow: when the meaning of an idiom cannot be worked out from the meaning of its constituents, it is called opaque, whereas when the meaning of an idiom can be worked out from the meaning of its constituents, it is called transparent (Glucksberg 2001: 72). Hence, *drop a bomb* is fully compositional but also semantically transparent since the literal and

idiomatic meaning of the idiom is overlapping. The idiom *kick the bucket* is partly compositional since it may alter regarding tense, but it is also semantically opaque, since it is not possible to interpret its individual words to get the idiomatic meaning to die. The idiom *by and large* is non-compositional since it has no relation to the idiomatic meaning and it cannot be altered regarding tense. It is semantically opaque, since it is not possible to get its meaning by recognizing and interpreting the individual words.

7. Methodology

7.1. Subjects

The subjects of the present study are the first year M.A. students- Center for English and Translation Studies, Aden University, South Yemen. The total number of the sample is forty students who participated in this study. All of them did the idiom recognition test and the idiom interpretation test. These subjects have been learning English for eleven years. The main purpose is to investigate the recognition and knowledge and the interpretation of English idiom meanings. Since idioms are considered as a specific area of language and a difficult one, it is inevitable that the subjects would have to be advanced learners of English.

The choice of the first year master students of English and translation studies as a sample for this study is mainly because we assume that such learners possess a reasonable proficiency in English and to some extent have knowledge of the English culture. These learners are also supposed to have some knowledge about idioms. The number of subjects in the study is (40) first year M.A. translation students.

7.2. Design of the Research Instruments

7.2.1. The Test

The test consists of two parts: part one is an idiom recognition test which included idioms out of context. Part two is an idiom interpretation test which included the same idioms from part one but these idioms are presented in context.

7.2.1.1. Part One: the Idiom Recognition Test

Part one is a multiple-choice test where each idiom is given three alternative meanings from which the subjects are to choose the correct one. It contains 12 different idioms. The main aim of this part is to discover the participants' knowledge of English idioms. To further check the recognition of idioms among subjects, there are also two distracters among the alternatives. The use of the three alternative meanings is considered to be suitable for the present study since only one of the three is correct and there is no need to use more than two distracters. (The correct alternative meanings of the idiom recognition test are presented with italics in Appendix 3). The distracters among the options in this part are determined according to various principles such as distracters that are related to the literal meaning of the idiom. For example, one distracter of the idiomatic expression *fight a losing battle* was 'to lose in a competition'. This is done to see if subjects still choose the literal meaning in spite of the clear definition in the beginning of the test. This definition explained that idioms have special meanings provided with an example (see Appendix 1). Some distracters that have a meaning of another idiom of English. For example, one distracter of the idiom *pull someone's leg* was 'to tell a secret'. To tell a secret is the meaning of the idiom *spill the beans*. In addition, some distracters are very close in their meanings.

7.2.1.2. Part Two: the Idiom Interpretation Test

The same idioms from part one are presented in short contexts and the subjects are requested to interpret their meaning. The purpose behind this part is to examine the influence of context on idiom meaning.

7.3. Administering the Instruments

All of the forty subjects in the study completed the two parts of the test. The subjects received the instructions in a written form as a reference; a definition of idioms that explains that idioms are expressions which have special meanings. Furthermore, an example that stated the non-literal meaning of an idiom was also given (Appendix 1). Part one of the test was done first, it took approximately 15 minutes. After a week, part two was given to the participants. It took approximately 25 minutes. This period of a week-gap was thought enough to ensure the non-influence of part one on part two. In other words, a week-gap was thought enough so as not to remember the options of part one that might be used immediately in interpreting part two.

8. Data Analysis

8.1. The Results of the Idiom Recognition Test

This part consists of 12 idioms to investigate the first year M.A. Students' recognition at the Center for English & Translation Studies, Aden University. The subjects who were tested are 40 students (males and females). Therefore, the number of responses in the test is 480 (40 students x 12 items =480 responses). The number of correct responses is counted as well as the number of deviant ones. There are 237 responses answered correctly with a percentage of 49.37% and 243 with a percentage of 50.63% are the deviant responses. The percentages of correct idiom responses in the following table (No.3) show that the students know about half the presented idioms.

8.1.1. The Correct Idiom Responses

The following table shows to what extent students recognize English idioms.

| Idioms | Number of correct answers | Item percentage | Percentage of recognition |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Transparent idioms | | | |
| 1- fight a losing battle | 21 | 52.5% | |
| 2- draw the line | 24 | 60% | |
| 3- go the extra mile | 28 | 70% | |
| Total | 73 | | 60.83% |
| Semi-transparent idioms | | | |
| 4- break the ice | 21 | 52.5% | |
| 5- kill two birds with one stone | 17 | 42.5% | |
| 6- give the green light | 31 | 77.5% | |
| Total | 69 | | 57.5% |
| Semi-opaque idioms | | | |
| 7- rain cats and dogs | 20 | 50% | |
| 8- beat around the bush | 25 | 62.5% | |
| 9- know the ropes | 11 | 27.5% | |
| Total | 56 | | 46.66% |
| Opaque idioms | | | |
| 10- pull someone's leg | 14 | 35% | |
| 11- a horse of a different colour | 12 | 30% | |

| | | | |
|--------------------------|---------|-------|--------|
| 12- kick the bucket | 13 | 32.5% | |
| Total | 39 | | 32.5% |
| Total of correct answers | 237/480 | | |
| Total percentage | | | 49.37% |

Table 3. Shows the percentage of recognition of English idioms.

This percentage can also be shown on a diagram as follow:

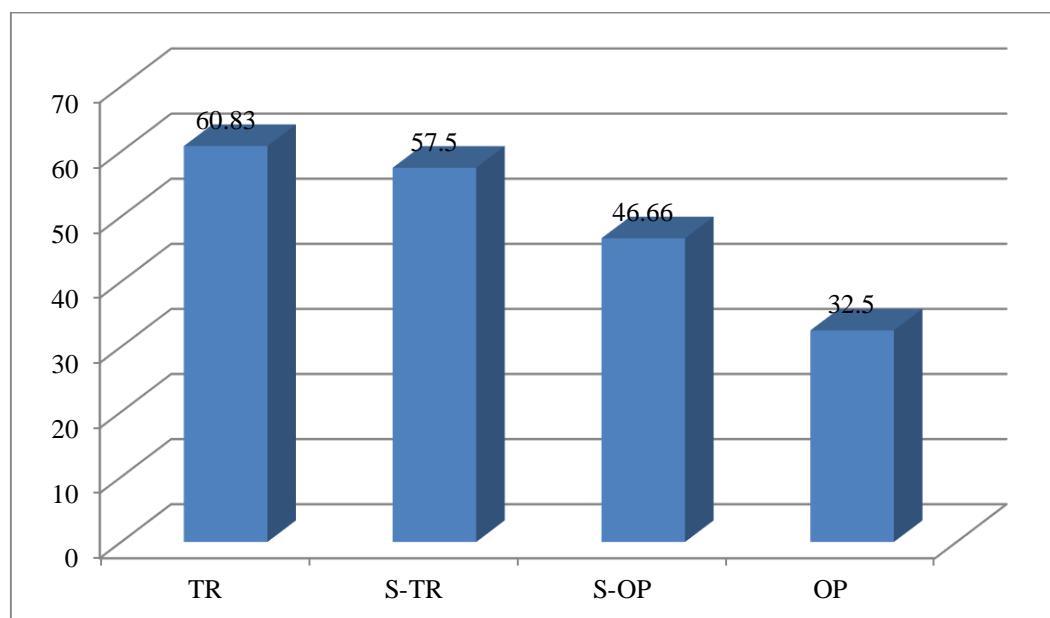


Figure 1. Percentage of student's recognition Of English idioms.

Table (3) and figure (1) above reveal that the degree of idiomaticity has a great impact on the percentage of students' recognition of English idioms. The results of the correct responses in the table above present the following: in each category (transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque and opaque), the total number of responses is 120 responses (3 items x 40 subjects). It is seen that the highest number of correct responses is recorded for transparent idioms 73 out of 140 with a percentage of 60.83%. Semi-transparent idioms came in the second position recording 69 correct responses with a percentage of 57.5%. The difficulty increases with the degree of idiomaticity, so the correct responses of semi-opaque idioms category are

56 correct responses with a percentage of 46.66%. This difficulty increased with opacity as the result of opaque idioms is 39 correct responses only with a percentage of 32.5%.

The results in table (3) above are ordered from transparency to opacity. The highest number of correct responses is item 6 *give the green light*, which was answered by 31 subjects with a percentage of 77.5%, and the lowest number of correct guesses is item 9 *know the ropes*, which was answered by only 11 subjects with a percentage of 27.5%. From the results displayed in the table above, it can be said that subjects have about 50% recognition of English idioms. This is due to the percentage of correct responses 49.37%.

8.1.2. The Incorrect Idiom Responses

In the following table the unfamiliarity of English idioms is shown.

| Idioms | Number of incorrect responses | Item percentage | Percentage of unfamiliarity |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| Transparent idioms | | | |
| 1- fight a losing battle | 19 | 47.5% | |
| 2- draw the line | 16 | 40% | |
| 3- go the extra mile | 12 | 30% | |
| Total | 47 | | 39.16% |
| Semi opaque idioms | | | |
| 4- break the ice | 19 | 47.5% | |
| 5- kill two birds with one stone | 23 | 57.5% | |
| 6- give the green light | 9 | 22.5% | |
| Total | 51 | | 42.5% |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------|-------|--------|
| Semi-opaque idioms | | | |
| 7- rain cats and dogs | 20 | 50% | |
| 8- beat around the bush | 15 | 37.5% | |
| 9- know the ropes | 29 | 72.5% | |
| Total | 64 | | 53.33% |
| Opaque idioms | | | |
| 10- pull someone's leg | 26 | 65% | |
| 11- a horse of a different colour | 28 | 70% | |
| 12- kick the bucket | 27 | 67.5% | |
| Total | 81 | | 67.5% |
| Total of correct answers | 243/480 | | |
| Total percentage | | | 50.63% |

Table 4. Shows the unfamiliarity of English idioms.

The percentage can be represented on a diagram as follow:

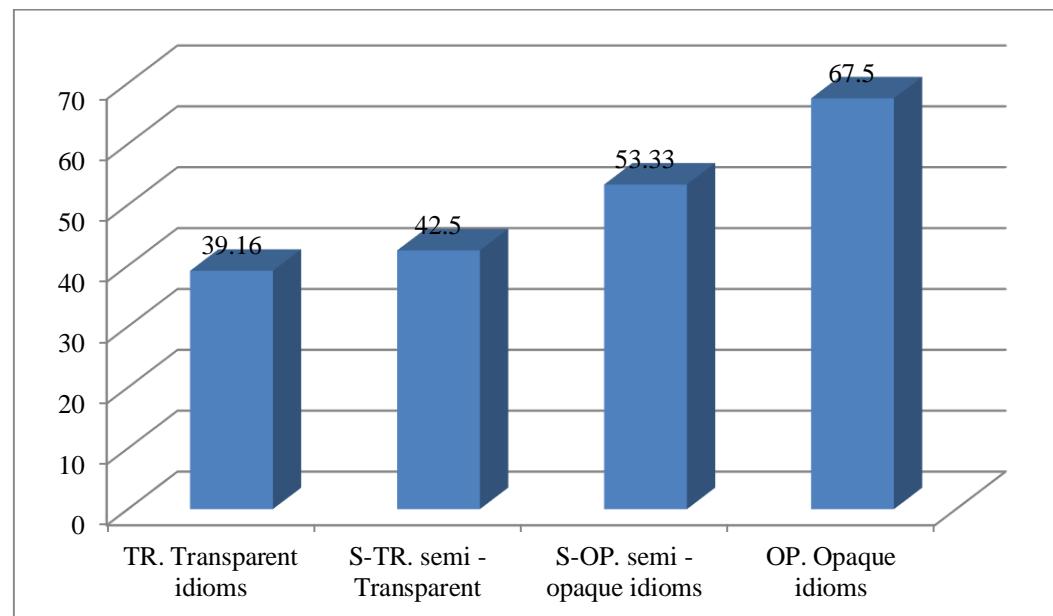


Figure 2. Percentage of students ' unfamiliarity with English idioms.

In comparing the number of answers in table (3) to table (4) above, it is clearly seen that the subjects made incorrect responses more than correct ones. Table (4) shows that 243 out of 480 responses are deviant answers. The percentage of incorrect responses is 50.63%. The number of incorrect responses shows that the total number of idioms in each category (transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque and opaque idioms) responses is 120 (3 items x 40 subjects). The category of opaque idioms is the more difficult type. The number of incorrect responses is 81 out of 120 responses with a percentage of 67.5%. Therefore, the correct responses recorded only 32.5%. In semi-opaque idioms category, the incorrect responses rated 53.33%. The transparent and semi-transparent idiom categories unfamiliarity are 39.16% and 42.5% respectively.

All in all, these results state that opaque idioms are more difficult than transparent idioms. The opaque idiom category: *pull someone's leg*, *a horse of a different colour* and *kick the bucket* recorded the highest number of deviant responses 81 out of 120 with a percentage of 67.5%. 28 out of 40 (1 item x 40 subjects) incorrect responses with a percentage of 70% are recorded for the idiomatic expression *a horse of a different colour*. It recorded the second high deviant answers. The idiomatic expression *kick the bucket* recorded the third high incorrect answers 27 with a percentage of 67.5%. The incorrect answers of the idiomatic expression *pull someone's leg* recorded 26 with a percentage of 65%. It is the fourth high incorrect deviant answer. The highest number of incorrect responses is for the idiom *know the ropes* with 29 deviant responses with a percentage of 72.5%. It is a semi-opaque idiom in which one part *know* has its literal meaning and the other part the *ropes* carries its idiomatic meaning.

The percentage of correct answers is (49.37%) and incorrect (50.63%) show no significant differences. The results are very close i.e. students have a somewhat understanding of English idioms. It is a positive sign that English idioms recognition is not at skate.

8.1.3. Unproblematic and Problematic Idioms

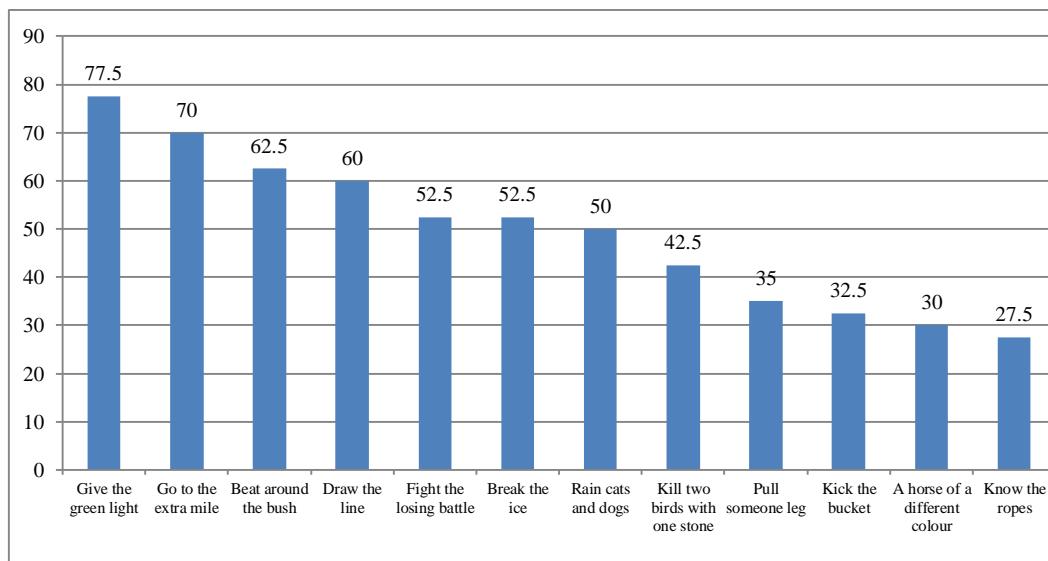


Figure 2. Distribution of correct responses for individual idioms.

Figure (2) indicates the percentage of correct responses for individual idioms. The bars show the order of individual idioms from the unproblematic idiom to the most problematic one. In other words, the order is from left to right i.e. from unproblematic to problematic. The idioms of which 50% or more of the subjects (40) chose the correct alternative are regarded as unproblematic and the ones of which less than 50% of all participants chose the correct alternative are considered to be problematic or difficult. As it can be shown from the figure, there are seven unproblematic idioms: *give the green light* is answered by 31 subjects with a percentage of (77.5%), *go the extra mile* is answered by 28 subjects with a percentage of (70%), *beat around the bush* is answered by 25 subjects with a percentage of (62.5%), *draw the line* is answered by 24 subjects with a percentage of (60%), both *fight the losing battle* and *break the ice* are answered by 21 subjects with a percentage of (52.5%), *rain cats and dogs* is answered by 20 subjects with a percentage of (50%) and five problematic ones: *kill two birds with one stone* is answered by 17 subjects with a percentage of (42.5%), *pull someone's leg* is answered by 14 subjects with a percentage of (35%), *kick the bucket* is answered by 13 subjects with a percentage of (32.5%), *a horse of a different colour* is answered by 12 subjects with a

percentage of (30%), *and know the ropes* is answered by only 11 subjects with a percentage of (27.5%).

8.1.4. The Results of the Idiom Interpretation Test

The test consists of the same 12 idioms from part one but they are presented in a short context to investigate the role of context in interpreting idioms.

8.1.4.1. The Correct Responses of Idioms in Context

All of the subjects who did the idiom recognition test (40) also did the idiom interpretation test. This means that the same number of responses in part one is available here in this part (480). The number of correct responses is counted and compared to part one. While the number of correct responses in part one is 237 with a percentage of 49.37%, it increased in this part (part two) to 294 with a percentage of 61.25%. In other words, correct responses increased by 11.88%. The following table shows the role of context in idiom interpretation.

| Idioms in context | Acceptable interpretation | Unacceptable interpretation | Percentage of acceptable answers | Percentage of unacceptable answers |
|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Transparent idioms | | | | |
| 1- Jack is ambitious to be rich but he doesn't get his hopes. This is because he | 26 | 14 | 65% | 35% |

| | | | | |
|---|----|----|-------|-------|
| always fights a losing battle. | | | | |
| 2- At what stage of age does a child stop being minor? You have to draw the line somewhere. | 27 | 13 | 67.5% | 32.5% |
| 3- The president expressed his determination to go the extra mile for developing the country. | 28 | 12 | 70% | 30% |
| Total | 81 | 39 | | |
| Total percentage | | | 67.5% | 35.5% |
| Semi-transparent idioms | | | | |
| 4- They were restless but Sam's arrival broke the ice and people began to talk and laugh. | 14 | 26 | 35% | 65% |
| 5- By doing these works exactly, you | 26 | 14 | 65% | 35% |

| | | | | |
|---|----|----|--------|--------|
| may kill two birds with one stone. | | | | |
| 6- After a long period of agreement the company gave him the green light to build twelve houses in the limited place. | 36 | 4 | 90% | 10% |
| Total | 74 | 44 | | |
| Total percentage | | | 63.33% | 36.67% |
| Semi-opaque idioms | | | | |
| 7- You can't get out, it is raining cats and dogs. | 26 | 14 | 65% | 35% |
| 8- Let's come to the point, why should you always beat around the bush. | 29 | 11 | 72.5% | 27.5% |
| 9- Someone can enjoy his job as soon as he knows the ropes. | 24 | 16 | 60% | 40% |
| Total | 79 | 41 | | |
| Total percentage | | | 65.83% | 34.16% |
| Opaque idioms | | | | |

| | | | | |
|--|---------|---------|--------|--------|
| 10- A: "Wow! Carl has done some really amazing things!" B: "don't believe everything he tells you. He was probably putting your leg." | 23 | 17 | 57.5% | 42.5% |
| 11- If he wants money to buy a bus, that's a horse of a different colour. | 16 | 24 | 40% | 60% |
| 12- Kate was sad and upset that her brother kicked the bucket in the car accident. | 19 | 21 | 47.66% | 53.34% |
| Total | 58 | 62 | | |
| Total percentage | | | 48.38% | 51.62% |
| Total number | 294/480 | 186/480 | | |
| Total percentage | | | 61.25% | 38.75% |

Table 5. Shows the role of context in interpreting idioms.

As stated previously and as table (5) shows, context plays a major role in interpreting and explaining the meaning of idioms. It can be seen that the overall (except one) scores are higher for part two when idioms are in context. When idioms are out of context, the percentage of correct responses is 49.37%. This percentage increases to 61.25% when idioms are in

context. The subjects performed better with respect to 10 idioms. This can be looked at when the results of part one, idioms out of context, are compared to part two, idioms in context. Table (6) below indicates the number of correct answers and percentages of idioms comprehension out of and in context.

| Idioms | Out of context | Percentage | In context | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1- Fight a losing battle | 21 | 52.5% | 26 | 65% |
| 2- Draw the line | 24 | 60% | 27 | 67.5% |
| 3- Go the extra mile | 28 | 70% | 28 | 70% |
| 4- Break the ice | 21 | 52.5% | 14 | 40% |
| 5- Kill two birds with one stone | 17 | 42.5% | 26 | 65% |
| 6- Give the green light | 31 | 77.5% | 36 | 90% |
| 7- Rain cats and dogs | 17 | 42.5% | 26 | 65% |
| 8- Beat around the bush | 25 | 62.5% | 29 | 72.5% |
| 9- Know the ropes | 11 | 27.5% | 24 | 60% |
| 10- Pull someone's leg | 14 | 35% | 23 | 57.5% |
| 11- A horse of a different colour | 12 | 30% | 16 | 40% |
| 12- Kick the bucket | 13 | 32.5% | 19 | 47.66% |
| Total | 237 | 49.39% | 294 | 61.25% |

Table 6. Comparison between idiom comprehension out of and in context.

Table (6) shows that the percentage of correct answers for 10 idioms is about 11.88% higher when idioms are in context than when they are out of context. That is to say, the idioms *fight a losing battle, draw the line, kill two birds with one stone, give the green light, rain cats and dogs, beat around the bush, know the ropes, pull someone's leg, a horse of a different colour, and kick the bucket* record 21, 24, 17, 31, 20, 25, 11, 14, 12, and 13 respectively, when they are out of context. The mark of correct guesses increased to 26, 27, 26, 36, 26, 29, 24, 23,

16, and 19 respectively, when they are in context. The idiom *go the extra mile* records the same frequency of correct guesses 28 out of and in context. The only idiom that retreated in its percentage is *break the ice*; out of context it records 52.5% but within context it records 40%. In part one, options enable the possibility to guess the meaning, but in part two contexts does not help and negative transfer happened. All in all, the results indicate the role of context in idiom comprehension and suggest that idioms are better interpreted in a brief context.

9. Findings and Discussion of Results

This part concerns itself with the findings and discussion of the effects of transparency, equivalence and context.

9.1. Transparency

Transparency is one of the most important factors that affect idiom recognition, interpretation. However, it cannot be ignored, as previous studies (Nippel and Rudzinski 1993; Herrmann 2002; Mantyla 2012) have demonstrated that idioms which are high in transparency are easier to comprehend than opaque ones. The results of the present study are in line with the previous studies. The higher amount of correct answers is for transparent idioms. Transparency certainly explains why *fight a losing battle*, *draw the line* and *go the extra mile* have a high amount of correct answers 60.83%. In addition, semi-transparent idioms *break the ice*, *kill two birds with one stone*, and *give the green light* have the second high correct guesses 57.5%. But semi-opaque idioms *rain cats and dogs*, *beat around the bush*, and *know the ropes* have a low amount of correct guesses 46.66% and opaque idioms *pull someone's leg*, *a horse of a different colour*, and *kick the bucket* have the lowest amount of correct guesses 32.5%. The opaque idioms and the semi- opaque idiom *know the ropes* recorded the lowest amount because of their opacity and unfamiliarity. As can be seen in the tendencies suggested by tables and figures

above, transparency is of assistance to the informants. The recognition, interpretation and process percentages towards the transparent end of the continuum tend to be higher than at the opaque end.

9.2. Arabic Equivalents

The resemblance of idioms to the mother tongue (Arabic) expressions was substantial in the subjects' responses. In the light of earlier studies (Irujo 1986b; Mantyla 2012), it is assumed that idioms that have a direct translation equivalent in the informants' native language, would be easier to understand than those that have not a direct equivalent in their mother tongue. The present study confirms that idioms with some kind of corresponding expression in Arabic are generally easier than others. Two idioms from those that recorded a high amount of correct responses have an equivalent in Arabic and the most difficult one does not have an equivalent in Arabic. To put it more clearly, the idiom *give the green light* that is the easiest, as it has an equivalent in Arabic يعطي الضوء الأخضر. The reason may not be that the words which constitute the idiom are familiar to the participants. Therefore, the main reason behind the correct responses is the first language positive transfer to second language i.e. from Arabic into English. In other words, when the idiomatic expression shares the same meaning and structure (identical) in second language, the recognition, interpretation and process of such expressions would be easier. In a similar way idiomatic expressions that have the same meaning even with a slightly different wording can be easier to understand. For example, the idiom *beat around the bush*, which has a similar idiomatic expression in Arabic يلف ويدور, recorded the third high amount of correct answers. Whereas, the idiom *know the ropes* that is the most difficult does not have an equivalent in Arabic. Likewise, idioms as *pull someone's leg* and *kick the bucket* that have no equivalents in Arabic are difficult and recorded low amount of correct answers.

9.3. Context

Context plays an important role in understanding idioms. The methodological aim of the study is to explore if the interpretation is improved when idioms are in a brief context. The results of this study reveal that context plays a crucial role in interpreting idioms. These results are similar to the previous studies on idioms (Colombo1993; Nippold and Martin1989; Cain, Twise & King 2009) that found that informants can provide more appropriate interpretations of idioms when idioms are in a brief context. 10 idioms recorded higher amount of correct guesses when they used in context. In other words, the idioms *fight a losing battle, draw the line, kill two birds with one stone, give the green light, rain cats and dogs, beat around the bush, know the ropes, pull some one's leg, a horse of a different colour, and kick the bucket* recorded 21, 24, 17, 31, 20, 25, 11, 14, 12, and 13 respectively, when they used out of context. The amount of correct guesses increased to 26, 27, 26, 36, 26, 29, 24, 23, 16, and 19 respectively, when they presented in context. However, in some cases the context is not helpful to facilitate the meaning if idioms are unfamiliar and it may lead to incorrect interpretation. The understanding of the idiom break the ice which means 'relieve the tension' became more difficult when subjects resorted to native language (Arabic). This may be attributed to the unfamiliarity with the idiom and they misinterpreted it as a false friend from Arabic into English. *Break the ice* is an idiomatic expression that appears to have a similar meaning in Arabic يكسر الحاجز, but it has a different meaning. To put it more clearly, one subject wrote "broke the ice means broke the situation" and translated it into Arabic "كسر الحاجز". Another subject wrote, it means "broke the position of silence" and translated it into Arabic "كسر حاجز الصمت". This is in accordance with the assumption of (Mantyla 2012).

10. Conclusion

This study investigated the recognition and interpretation by M.A. Students at the Center for English and Translation Studies. Idioms in this study are classified into four categories: transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, and opaque idioms. These types are investigated in the multiple-choice test to see how well the subjects recognize them. They are also investigated in context to find out if context helps in interpreting them.

The results of the study show that idioms are a difficult area in language learning, because of the absence of relation between their literal and figurative meaning. The results show that the percentage of correct responses of the idiom recognition test is 49.37 %, while the percentage of incorrect ones is 50.63%. The degree of transparency has a great impact on the recognition of idioms. The three transparent idiomatic expressions *fight a losing battle*, *draw the line and go the extra mile* have the highest correct responses 73 with a percentage of 60.83%. Semi-transparent idioms *break the ice*, *kill two birds with one stone* and *give the green light* have the second high record of correct responses 69 with a percentage of 57.5 %. The difficulty of opacity is shown by the low amount of correct responses for semi-opaque and opaque idioms. Semi-opaque idioms *rain cats and dogs*, *beat around the bush* and *know the ropes* have 56 correct responses only with a percentage of 46.66%, whereas opaque idioms *pull someone's leg*, *a horse of a different colour* and *kick the bucket* have only 39 correct responses with a percentage of 32.5%. For transparency the results reveal that transparent idioms are easier than opaque ones because the literal meaning of such idioms is clear and has a relation with the idiomatic meaning. Thus, students through compositionality are able to figure out the idiomatic meaning, but in semantic opacity of idioms the literal meaning of the constituents does not help to work out the idiomatic one.

In addition, the results suggest that idioms which have equivalents either identical (i.e. have the same form and meaning) or have the same meaning only in Arabic are easy to recognize. The idiom *give the green light* which has the same form and meaning in Arabic

يعطي الضوء الأخضر records the highest correct responses of 31 with a percentage of 77.5% and يلتف ويدور beat around the bush which has the same meaning in Arabic and records the third high responses 25 with a percentage of 62.5%.

As regards context the results of the study show that the context plays an important role in interpreting idioms. The role of context compared to no context in idiom comprehension can be looked at when the results of part one of the test of the present study are compared to the results of part two of the test. In part one, idioms are used out of context but in part two they are used within context. The results reveal that context plays a crucial role in understanding and improving the recognition and interpretation of idioms as well as the processes related thereto.

On the other hand, when idioms are used out of context, the percentage of correct responses is 49.37%, compared with 61.25% when idioms are contextualized. The subjects performed better as far as 10 idioms are concerned. The percentage of correct answers for 10 idioms increased about 11.88%. The only idiom that retreated in its percentage is break the ice; out of context it recorded 52.5% but in context it recorded 40%. The reason for this decline is the negative transfer as a false friend from Arabic into English as يكسر الحاجز. In part one, the options enabled the possibility to guess the meaning, but in part two, context does not help and negative transfer happened. All in all, the results indicate the significantly positive role of context in idiom comprehension and show that idioms are better interpreted in a brief context.

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Appendices

Appendix (1)

Part One

An Idiom Students' Recognition Test

Idioms are expressions which have special meanings. For example, "*in the neck of time*" is an idiom that means just before it is too late, or just before something bad happens.

Your booklet contains 12 idioms. Choose the best explanation of each idiom from a choice of three possible answers. Read each answer carefully and choose the one answer that best explains the idiom. After you finish, read your answers again and check them carefully.

1- *Fight a losing battle*

- a) To be fated to fail in your efforts
- b) To not success in your exam
- c) To lose in a competition

2- *Draw the line*

- a) To agree with someone's ideas
- b) To set a point of what to do or accept
- c) To not accept points or ideas

3- *Go the extra mile*

- a) To walk quickly, the distance is far away
- b) To make more effort to achieve plans
- c) To do things more quickly

4- *Break the ice*

- a) To make someone nervous
- b) To make someone feels cold
- c) To leave tension and be in a good situation

5- *Kill two birds with one stone*

- a) To do one good aim by doing two actions
- b) To achieve several things at the same time
- c) To make two useful results by just doing one action

6- *Give the green light*

- a) Permit or allow someone to carry out their plans
- b) Agree with someone's opinions without hesitations
- c) Make someone realize the true nature of a situation

7- *Rain cats and dogs*

- a) To rain all day
- b) To rain heavily
- c) To rain abruptly

8- *Beat around the bush*

- a) To intend to discuss a topic
- b) To avoid a topic
- c) To win a race by the length of a bush

9- *Know the ropes*

- a) To understand to solve problems
- b) To know how to do a job
- c) To be careful to go through a road

10- *Pull someone's leg*

- a) To tease someone by telling him untrue things
- b) To tell a secret
- c) To make someone fall down

11- *A horse of a different colour*

- a) It is a different matter
- b) It is a difficult problem to solve
- c) It is an easy issue

12- *Kick the bucket*

- a) To be sick
- b) To hurt
- c) To die

Appendix (2)

Part Two

An Idiom Interpretation Test

The same idioms in part one are included in your booklet. Each idiom is used in a context. Write down your answer for each idiom. Please explain what you think the idiom means. Write down a good explanation of the idiom. Here is an example,

Mary was about to tell Jim a secret when Sally said "*hold your tongue!*" This means that Sally wanted Mary to be quiet.

Now answer the rest of the idioms in contexts. If you aren't sure of any answer just take a guess. Just write down what you think the idiom means. After you finish, go back and check your answer carefully.

- 1- Jack is ambitious to be rich but he fails in achieving his plans. This is because he always *fights a losing battle*.
- 2- At what stage of age does a child stop being minor? You have to *draw the line* somewhere.
- 3- The president expressed his determination to *go the extra mile* for developing the country.
- 4- They were restless but Sam's arrival *broke the ice* and people began to talk and laugh.
- 5- By doing this work exactly, you may *kill two birds with one stone*.
- 6- After a long period of disagreement, the company *gave him the green light* to build 12 houses in the limited place.
- 7- You can't go out, it is *raining cats and dogs*.
- 8- Let's come to the point; why should you always beat around the bush?
- 9- Someone can enjoy his job as soon as he *knows the ropes*.
- 10- A: "Wow! Carl has done some really amazing things!"

B: "Don't believe everything he tells you. He was probably *pulling your leg*."

11- If he wants money to buy a bus, that's *a horse of a different colour*.

12- Kate was sad and upset that her brother *kicked the bucket* in the car accident.

Appendix (3)

An Idiom Students' Recognition Test (Correct Answers in Italics)

Idioms are expressions which have special meanings. For example, "*in the neck of time*" is an idiom that means just before it is too late, or just before something bad happens.

Your booklet contains 12 idioms. Choose the best explanation of each idiom from a choice of three possible answers. Read each answer carefully and choose the one answer that best explains the idiom. After you finish, read your answers again and check them carefully.

1- *Fight a losing battle*

- a) *To be fated to fail in your efforts*
- b) To not success in your exam
- c) To lose in a competition

2- *Draw the line*

- a) To agree with someone's ideas
- b) *To set a point of what to do or accept*
- c) To not accept points or ideas

3- *Go the extra mile*

- a) To walk quickly, the distance is far away
- b) *To make more effort to achieve plans*
- c) To do things more quickly

4- *Break the ice*

- a) To make someone nervous
- b) To make someone feels cold
- c) *To leave tension and be in a good situation*

5- *Kill two birds with one stone*

- a) To do one good aim by doing two actions

- b) To achieve several things at the same time
- c) *To make two useful results by just doing one action*

6- *Give the green light*

- a) *Permit or allow someone to carry out his plans*
- b) Agree with someone's opinions without hesitations
- c) Make someone realize the true nature of a situation

7- *Rain cats and dogs*

- a) To rain all day
- b) *To rain heavily*
- c) To rain abruptly

8- *Beat around the bush*

- a) To intend to discuss a topic
- b) *To avoid a topic*
- c) To win a race by the length of a bush

9- *Know the ropes*

- a) To understand to solve problems
- b) *To know how to do a job*
- c) To be careful to go through a road

10- *Pull someone's leg*

- a) *To tease someone by telling him untrue things*
- b) To tell a secret
- c) To make someone fall down

11- *A horse of a different colour*

- a) *It is a different matter*
- b) It is a difficult problem to solve

c) It is an easy issue

12- *Kick the bucket*

a) To be sick

b) To hurt

c) *To die*